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ABSTRACT

Investigated were school children's recognition of social class distinctions, cues they used, and the relationship of their ideas about social class to other beliefs and attitudes about the social world. An ethnically mixed group of 201 male and female subjects participated in the study. Five age groups were represented: second, fifth, and sixth graders, considered separately; a combined eighth/ninth-grade group; and college students. Subjects sorted photographs of people into categories along a poor-to-rich dimension, gave reasons for their categorizations, and participated in an interview eliciting a wider range of beliefs and attitudes. Substantial agreement across grade levels was found in judgments about who was rich or poor. Young children emphasized external aspects of class differences and had difficulty imagining role changes. Older children also used external features but added psychological explanations; they thought upward mobiliity would be difficult due to external and internal limits. By adolescence, subjects saw the world as less flexible and thought it unlikely that they would change their socioeconomic status. Young subjects thought that rich and poor could be friends; older children saw barriers to such friendships. Children's feelings appeared to be involved in decisions made about people in the photographs; data also revealed relationships among notions about social class, likeability, and attractiveness. (Examples of photographs used are appended.) (RH)

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Children's Understanding of Social Class Differences*

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The speakers in this symposium have told you about children's understanding of work roles, gender and racial categories, and traditional and unconventional families. My topic concerns still another kind of social category, the one that adults often call social class. I believe that the perception and understanding of social class is an important part of people's lives and of their everyday experience. After all, we can see what I'll call "social class distinctions" or "social class differences" when we walk down the streets of almost any city in the United States. Some people are riding around in chauffeur-driven limousines, wearing mink coats, entering restaurants which have valets at the door. Others are huddling in doorways, shabbily dressed, looking in garbage cans. It seems likely, then, that young children see some of these same things. They probably begin picking up this kind of information early and most likely they use it to make a variety of simple social distinctions, usings words they already have in their vocabulary, like happy and sad, good and bad, or maybe even rich and poor.

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*Portions of this paper were presented in the symposium, "Young Children's Conceptions of Social Distinctions" at the biannual meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development, Detroit, Michigan, April, 1983.

But, clearly, the concept of social class is far too advanced and complex for young children to know or talk about. Therefore, in order to study children's capacity to make some of these distinctions and in order to look for the precursors of social class concepts, we must find some way to let children show us what they know without using words like social class, upper class, and so forth.

Several methods have been tried. Some social-learning oriented researchers have used a variety of concrete tasks. School-aged children have been asked to: 1. rate sketches of homes, recreational activities, and clothes on a "money" scale (Stendler, 1949); 2. match pairs of drawings of houses and people (Jahoda, 1959); sort pictures of houses, cars, and people into family units (Tudor, 1971); and rate cartoon pictures of occupations on a "prestige" scale (De Fleur and De Fleur, 1967).

Other investigators have used an interview technique to assess the "accuracy" with which elementary school children can identify or use a variety of dimensions associated with social class concepts. In two studies, children were asked to rate occupations on a prestige or status scale and discuss their observations (Oeser and Hammond, 1954; Simmons and Rosenberg, 1971). In another, children's conceptions of poverty were examined by showing subjects a picture of a poverty situation and encouraging them to talk about the issues (Estvan, 1952).

The object of all these studies has been to see how well children can match the judgments of adults. Not surprisingly, the results show that by the third grade (and in some studies even a little before) children begin to demonstrate considerable accuracy in matching their judgments with those of adults. For example, third grade children can tell you which people live in which houses, wear certain clothes, engage in

certain leisure activities, and have the "best" jobs. This "accuracy," which involves the recognition of the more visible and tangible aspects of social class differences, continues to improve through the school years in all the studies where several age groups were involved.

A few more cognitively oriented developmental psychologists--especially Connell in Australia (1978) and Leahy in the United States (1981, 1983, in press)--have used an interview technique to discvoer what children and adolescents know about being rich and poor. Essentially the same method was used in both studies: school children of different ages were interviewed about their notions of what it means to be "rich" and "poor" and subjects were asked a number of peripherally related questions (for example, how are poor and rich people different, how are they similar, how do people get to be rich and poor?).

Both Leahy and Connell produced a developmental analysis of children's understanding. In both studies younger children produced only a little information about social class categories. They could describe some of the more concrete, visible, or behavioral dimensions associated with the idea of social class. Both reports highlighted the increasing sophistication and comprehension of the older children which is said to reflect new abilities to coordinate different aspects of the concept of social class and to deal with structural, relational, and systemic features of social class systems.

In this paper I will describe our own study[1] which was designed to combine the most promising features of previous investigations. We wanted to provide our youngest subjects with the opportunity to respond at their fullest capacity, while making the sessions stimulating and engaging for everyone.

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[1]The study was designed and executed in collaboration with Phillip Shaver. Thanks go to all our assistants, especially Joan Brittain, Weldon Brewer, Robert Weinstein, Antoinette Abate, and Cindy Hazan.

There were three main questions which guided our thinking: First, do young school children recognize social class distinctions among real people (in our case among photographs of real people)? Second, what criteria or cues do children use in making these distinctions and how do these criteria change over time? Third, how might children's understanding of these distinctions relate to other beliefs they have about the social world in which they live?

Before I describe the study itself, I should say that there will be more left unsaid than said. In this paper I will present only a few of the highlights and try to give you a flavor of a very complex investigation. For a fuller treatment and further details, the interested person may consult Naimark (1981), Naimark and Shaver (1982), and Naimark and Shaver (in preparation).

The study included 201 male and female subjects in New York City Public Schools and a local university. About half the subjects were minority group members, predominantly Black. Subjects came from integrated and segregated (all Black) schools and represented the full scale of scoioeconomic groupings as measured by a modified Hollingshead technique.

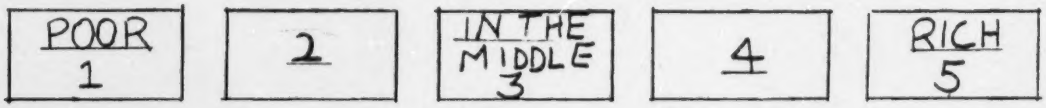
Five age groups were represented: second, fifth, and sixth graders; an eighth/ninth grade group combined; and college students (mostly sophomores). Subjects ranged in age from seven to 27 years. Inclusion of the oldest group allowed us to develop some expectations based on what a group of young adults from a broad range of backgrounds would say and do given our tasks. Results specific to this oldest group will be omitted here; instead this paper will concentrate on the children and young adolescents.

Let me mention a few words about our procedure. Subjects were seen individually in their schools in the spring of 1980. The sessions were tape

recorded and later transcribed. The procedure involved three separate but interrelated tasks which we developed on the basis of the three principle research questions mentioned above.

In the first task, which addressed the question of whether children can recognize and make socioeconomic distinctions, subjects were asked to sort 36 8 X 11 glossy black and white photographs of real people into categories along a poor-to-rich dimension. There were three reasons for choosing the words "poor" and "rich" as the most appropriate ones for our task. First, we believed that school-aged children would have some idea about what those words mean. Second, wealth and income have been repeatedly identified in research with adults as central components of the social class concept. Third, several developmental researchers have already used the words "rich" and "poor" in working with children and have obtained very promising results.

So, we asked subjects to organize the photographs into as many as five separate categories, putting photographs where they thought they belonged. As a guide, we placed five clearly marked file cards in a row on a long table where subjects could work. The cards were identified as they appear below:



The photographs represented a reasonable (that is, not obviously atypical) cross-section of the population in terms of age, sex, race, occupation, location, etc. (A sample of the photographs is included in Appendix 1.) Subjects saw all 36 photographs at once arranged randomly on specially designed display racks. They could pick them up easily and move

to the tables to sort them.

When subjects completed the sorting, we began the second task which was designed to encourage subjects to talk about their sorting decisions. We wanted to know what criteria children of different ages and backgrounds would mention in explaining their decisions. Subjects were asked the following question which was repeated five times, once for each category of photographs: "What made you put these people into this pile?"[2]

The third task consisted of a structured but open-ended, eleven question interview designed to discover what relationships might exist between children's developing concepts of social class and their ideas and feelings about other facets of social life. Here, too, we used the photographs as a base or springboard from which to engage children in conversation. Some of the questions were: Can the rich and poor people be friends? Who are some of the most likeable people? Which people have good jobs? What do certain pictured children do for fun on the weekends?

* * *

With this description of our three-part procedure in mind, I'll turn now to some of our results which, taken together, provide a picture of children's developing awareness of social class categories and the changes that occur with age in children's perspective and emphasis.

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[2]You should also know that we conducted a separate rating study with 119 young adults who were asked to rate the 36 photographs shown in slide form on 19 Likert type scaled items. The data collected permitted us to think about how adults view the set of photographs and to use some of the findings to predict children's responses to certain questions in our third task.

We conducted statistical analyses to examine effects of subjects' sex, race, and social class, in addition to age; and although there were many interesting effects, by far the most consistent and powerful differences were those associated with age. In this report, I'll limit myself primarily to those age differences.

First, as Figure 1 shows, the number of statistically significant chi squares for the children's sorting of the photographs is clearly related to school grade, and, therefore, to age. However, it can be seen that even young children can recognize and distinguish among a number of people in our poor-rich five category scheme. You can also see that the proportion of significant chi squares rises sharply with age indicating that children's ability to sort photographs in a systematic way increases rapidly with age. Second graders sorted about a quarter of the pictures nonrandomly (most of those pictures being at the two ends of the poor-rich scale). But, by the eighth/ninth grade, subjects sorted almost 100% of the photographs nonrandomly.

The second figure (Figure 2) shows a further measure of the increasing consensus about photographs' location. Using a standard deviation measure, averaged over the 36 photographs, at each grade level, we could show that disagreement about where the pictures belong declined dramatically with age (especially between the second and fifith grades). Let me add that for about half the photographs we found no significant differences in placement as a function of children's age or grade level.

These few findings, we think, confirm and strengthen those of other researchers by demonstrating clearly that elementary school

children have the ability to recognize many apparent socioeconomic differences and that even seven year olds are capable of making shared or agreed upon decisions regarding the classification of a number of the real people pictured in our photographs.

To understand better how the placement of particular photographs was affected by subjects' grade, age, sex, race and social class, we conducted analyses of variances and multiple regression analyses for each photograph. For about half the photographs, there was no significant difference in placement as a function of children's age or grade level. However, older children tended to place some of the other photographs into somewhat "poorer" categories, with the major change again occurring between the second and fifth grades.

Very few sex differences among subjects were found. There were, however, a few interesting differences between low and high SEC subjects and between white and nonwhite subjects. Being a member of a lower class was associated with judging photographs of working people as richer, while being nonwhite was associated with sorting pictures of minority individuals into poorer categories.

In summary, young children seem to know a good deal about rich and poor people. Moreover, in making judgments about who is rich and who is poor (even sometimes who is in the middle), there is substantial agreement across age and grade levels. We conclude from this that things children see--in this case, the content of the pictures themselves--can be major determinants of their ability to make clear distinctions among people and to categorize them accordingly.

With our second task, in which we asked subjects to tell us what made them put the photographs into the categories they chose, we

were able to discover much about the content and form of subjects' explanations for their picture sorting decisions. I should mention that we created a coding manual for our content analyses. The manual for this question contains 64 separate codes, grouped under 21 major conceptual categories, many of which other researchers have found to be aspects or components of adult conceptions of social class. In Table 1 you can see some of the concepts which children mentioned Above the dotted line are those categories which younger children used somewhat more often than older ones. Below the dotted line are those dimensions which older children used more frequently than younger ones. Please note that the numbers you see represent the proportion of time subjects spent talking about a given dimension. Permit me to include here a few verbatim responses which may give you a better sense of the power and poignancy of children's comments. In response to the question, "What made you pu these people in the poor place?", several second graders answered this way:

> "...because her house is dirty and she don't got nothin'."
>
> "...I think (she) would go in the poor place. It looks like her clothes are all wrecked up...and her hair is all messy."
>
> "...they feel sad and they don't have no family...and they starve and they don't have food to eat."

Or these comments by some eighth/ninth grade students:

> "...I put basically minority...I didn't mean to do that, it's just that when I looked at it, it looked as though basically they're all doing some kind of job that's poor or under lower class people would do."
>
> "Well, #30, he looks like a grape picker, and we learned in social studies that they don't make too much money in California. See, they're mostly immigrants from Mexico, and they're hired for hard labor and they don't get paid much. He looks tired, maybe dirty."

When asked why they put certain people in the "rich" place, several second graders responded as follows:

"I think he's in the rich place because he has a cake of his own."

"...he looks like he's wearing a three piece suit and smoking a cigar."

"He look like a buildin' designer. I heard buildin' designers get a lotta' money."

Eighth/ninth grade students had these things to say about the "rich":

"...like maybe what he's drinking, or how he's sitting in his chair, like he's superior over some people."

"She either married into it, or she went to college and from there went into some other field and studied whatever she does and worked her way up."

"He's a doctor, and he seemed to me to be--well, he looks about middle age, so he's probably been a doctor for awhile, and when I think of a doctor, I think 'upper class'."

You may recall that our second question had two parts--we wanted to know not only what criteria subjects mentioned, but how the criteria changed with age. We answered the question by choosing three ways to measure these changes and we called our measures: complexity, internality, and abstractness. The measure of complexity was a simple count of the total number of different dimensions (out of the 64) that children mentioned. This number goes up significantly with age as shown in Figure 3. Essentially, we chose to consider the variety and completeness of subjects' responses as a rough index of complexity.

Next, using a distinction made by other developmental researchers, we labeled codes as either depicting people's external and behavioral features or as representing their internal or psychological qualities. In this way, we discovered that young children do concentrate fairly heavily on the external manifestations of social class differences, those things that I mentioned we can often see when we walk down the street. Having fancy or raggedy clothes, living in pretty or ugly

surroundings, acting nice or mean are some examples of what young children emphasize. Older children, as Figure 4 shows, continue to use these kinds of criteria, but they add psychological explanations. They say that they put people into certain categories because they were lazy or motivated, smart or dumb, cruel or kind, satisfied or miserable.

Our third measure identified codes which represented concrete and visible features of the photographs versus those which we call abstract; that is, which required subjects to make inferences about events, situations, or relations not directly observable in the pictures themselves. In Figure 5, you can see the significant decline with age in the use of concrete constructs and the increase in the use of abstract features--features not directly available in the photographs' content--such as power and prestige, occupational mobility and educational opportunity, and relations among different social classes.

Let me try to summarize to this point. I've stated that school children notice features which enable them to distinguish between rich and poor people (and some of those in between as well). I've explained that with age they get better at making distinctions and now I've described what cues and concepts younger and older children mention most often in talking about these distinctions. Young children use a small number of cues to identify people's place in the poor to rich categories and most of those cues are concrete and external. Older children are not only more systematic in their categorizations, and in more agreement about where people belong, but they talk about internal qualities of people and abstract features of social class systems.

I'll end the discussion of what children know about social class by telling you that when we asked subjects to define a series of social

class terms, we found, not unexpectedly, that second graders had very little knowledge of social class terminology. In Figure 6 you can see that lower and upper class, the conceptually polar extremes, are the terms children learn earliest, a fact which fits well with our findings that many of the photographs at the polar extremes were the easiest for young children to categorize. Clearly, although young children are fairly good at distinguishing between rich and poor people, they don't have an abstract social class vocabulary for describing the differences they see, nor do they discuss relationships or possible antagonisms between social class catgories. The figure also shows that with age children's ability to explain fully the meaning of class terms increases. You'll notice too, that the development of the highly abstract term "social class" lags behind the others and only begins to develop at the adolescent period.

While the measures I have described to you so far were not specifically designed to validate any particular stage model of the development of social class concepts, they have produced results which are quite compatible with those of other developmental studies. Leahy's findings in the United States in the mid 1970's and Connell's findings in Australia in the 1960's fit extremely well with ours and, somewhat surprisingly, many of the actual statements of children in the three studies were almost identical. There is no agreement yet as to what to call these stages, or exactly how to explain them, but the cross-study and cross-societal similarities in the data are striking.

* * *

It is in the third part of our study, however, where we began to tackle certain questions which haven't been specifically addressed before in the context of a developmental study on social class, that we found results which we think have important implications for the quality of children's lives, for their feelings about themselves and about the social world in which they live. Perhaps these findings will suggest to you, as they do to us, directions for future research.

First, let me tell you briefly about children's understanding of occupational mobility. Our results were somewhat complicated because we found that a number of younger as well as older subjects believed that changing jobs and "moving up" would be difficult--but for different reasons. Some younger subjects were unable to conceive of what we call role changes. They couldn't imagine a street sweeper taking off his uniform to go to work in a factory or a dancer taking off her leotard to work in an office. I should mention that Watson (with Fischer, 1980), Fischer (1980) and their colleagues have observed this in their very young subjects, too. Some of our young subjects seemed to have difficulty imagining role changes. Older subjects, on the other hand, say explicitly that upward mobility is often difficult because of both internal and external limits. Many people, they say, aren't motivated or smart enough to struggle for a better position. Furthermore, these older subjects say that the system doesn't offer equal opportunities to people from all backgrounds. Mirroring our other findings, the young children here are caught by the external trappings of jobs--the clothes and the props--while older children consider abstract relationships between occupational groups and look inside individuals for explanations of events and situations. Interestingly, while children from the upper classes in our study see less movement in the

system, their own future occupational aspirations rise significantly with age. Lower class children's aspirations also rise with age but not as sharply.

What all this suggests to us is that as children come to understand better the world of work and the meaning of social class, they begin to view that world as more rigid, less flexible. By adolescence many see their own futures as likely to remain in or close to the position from where they began.

This sense of rigidity in the system could also be seen in older children's notions about friendship. Young subjects were confident that the poor and rich people in our photographs could be friends. The concrete and external differences they see between them (for example, having or not having good jobs, acting nice or mean, having good or bad manners) can be overcome by acts of simple good will like getting together, having a cup of coffee and talking. Somewhat paradoxically, as children grow older, they begin to see and can articulate the overall similarities between the rich and the poor (that is, they're all people; they all have feelings, hearts, minds, etc.) but, at the same time, they begin to doubt seriously the possibility of friendship between those at opposite ends of the social class system. They say these people are unlikely ever to meet, and, what's more, they say that the attitudes of the rich (that is, they look down on the poor) and the attitudes of the poor (that is, they are jealous and suspicious of the rich) are real barriers to friendship.

We believe that children's feelings are involved in many of the decisions they made about the people in the pictures. Some of these are decisions about which people our subjects found likeable and how they conceived of leisure time for children.

For example, when we asked subjects which people they thought they might like if they met them, not surprisingly, almost everyone in our study found that those who are rich, young, attractive, doing fun things and (for our male subjects) able to do things for the subjects themselves are the likeable people. Subjects made these decisions in spite of the fact that we had shuffled and mixed up the once sorted photographs, had removed the cards marking the different categories, and had encouraged subjects to consider this interview separately from their sorting and explanation tasks. These results show striking, if not unexpected, relationships between notions about social class and those about likeability and attractiveness.

Finally, we discovered that children have a sense of how all this works in the world of children. One pictured little girl wearing a simple sweater with her thumb near her mouth and no smile is seen as not having much fun on the weekends; instead she does chores, helps her mother, takes care of her brothers and sisters and, according to our older subjects, hangs out on the street.

But another girl who is well groomed and well dressed, pictured sitting on a sofa with a cat is seen as playing with nice toys and with her friends; she goes out with her family and goes to the theater, restaurants, and museums. These differences are perceived even by the youngest subjects (78% said that the two girls do different things on the weekends) and this despite the fact that both girls are about the same age (9-10 years) and come from the same racial background (Black). Furthermore, even though young children couldn't explain why the two children engage in different activities as a difference in social class--a notion which the older subjects explicitly stated--they could certainly recognize the differences in terms of everyday, real life experiences.

In conclusion, then, I'm going to speculate for a moment and suggest a tentative picture of how all these data fit together and what they might mean.

Young children begin by identifying types of people who fit into the rich and poor categories. They recognize who is stylish and elegant and who is raggedy and unkempt. Early on, they start to evaluate the people in these categories differently and they react emotionally to them, finding those at the rich end more appealing than those at the poor end. They even say that rich children are having more fun than poor children. They base many of their judgments on concrete and external dimensions, and the number of dimensions that they can put together is limited.

But something changes with age. The capacity to use abstract concepts and to make inferences about psychological events allows the young adolescent to do something that the young child does not--to make relational statements, to see one social class category as it affects and relates to another, and to have a conception of an organized, interrelated system. By adolescence, many people believe that there isn't so much movement or fluidity in the system, that people stick to their own kind and don't move so easily to new or better jobs, and don't make cross-class friendships.

Perhaps the main contribution of our study is that it has produced findings compatible with previous research in several different Western countries, and it has begun to ask questions about how knowledge of the social class system works in real life to affect children's feelings, evaluations, and beliefs about their own world and their future in it.

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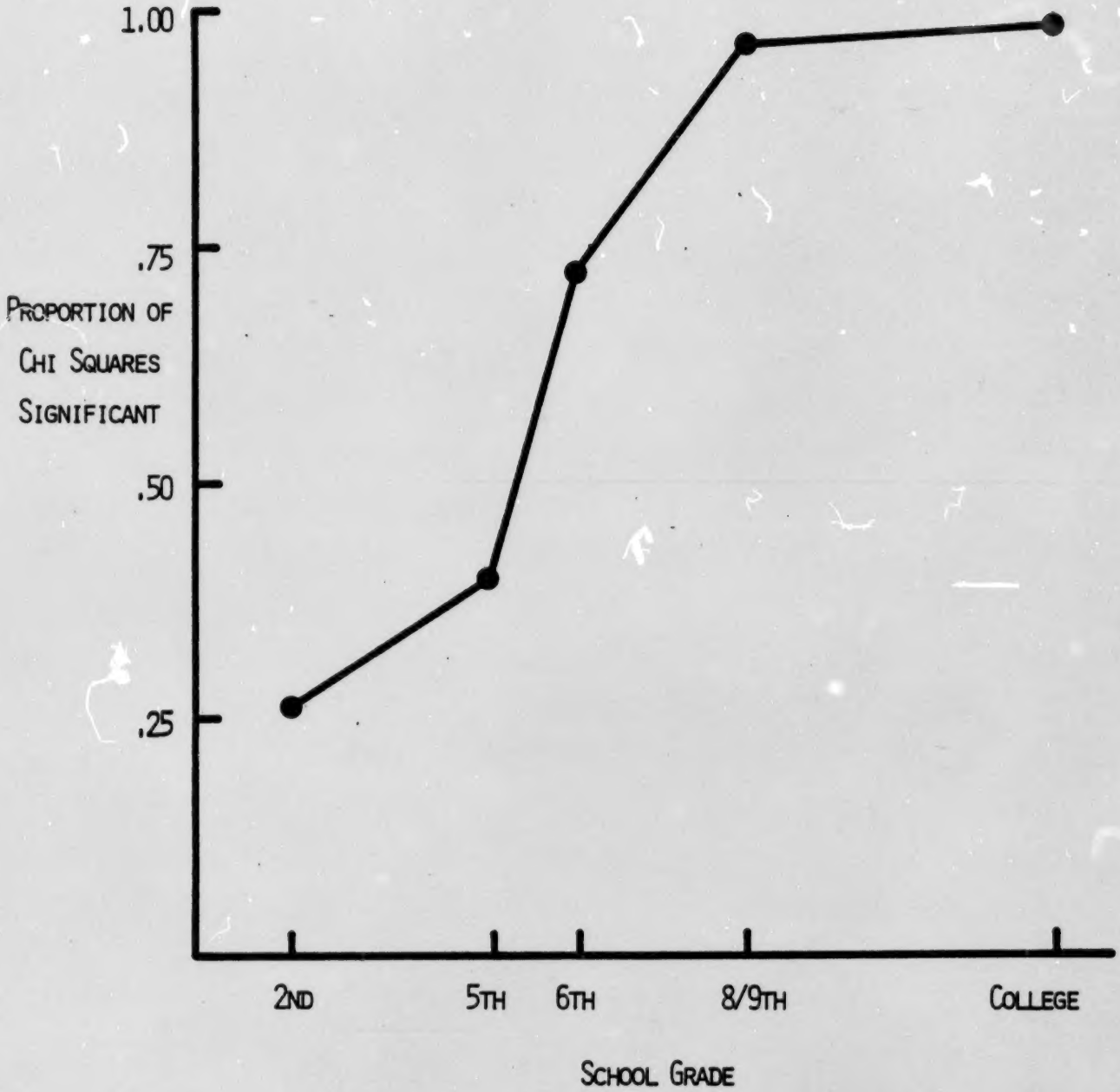


FIGURE 1. PROPORTION OF CHI SQUARES SQUARES SIGNIFICANT AT $p < .001$, INDICATING SORTING AGREEMENT, AS A FUNCTION OF GRADE IN SCHOOL

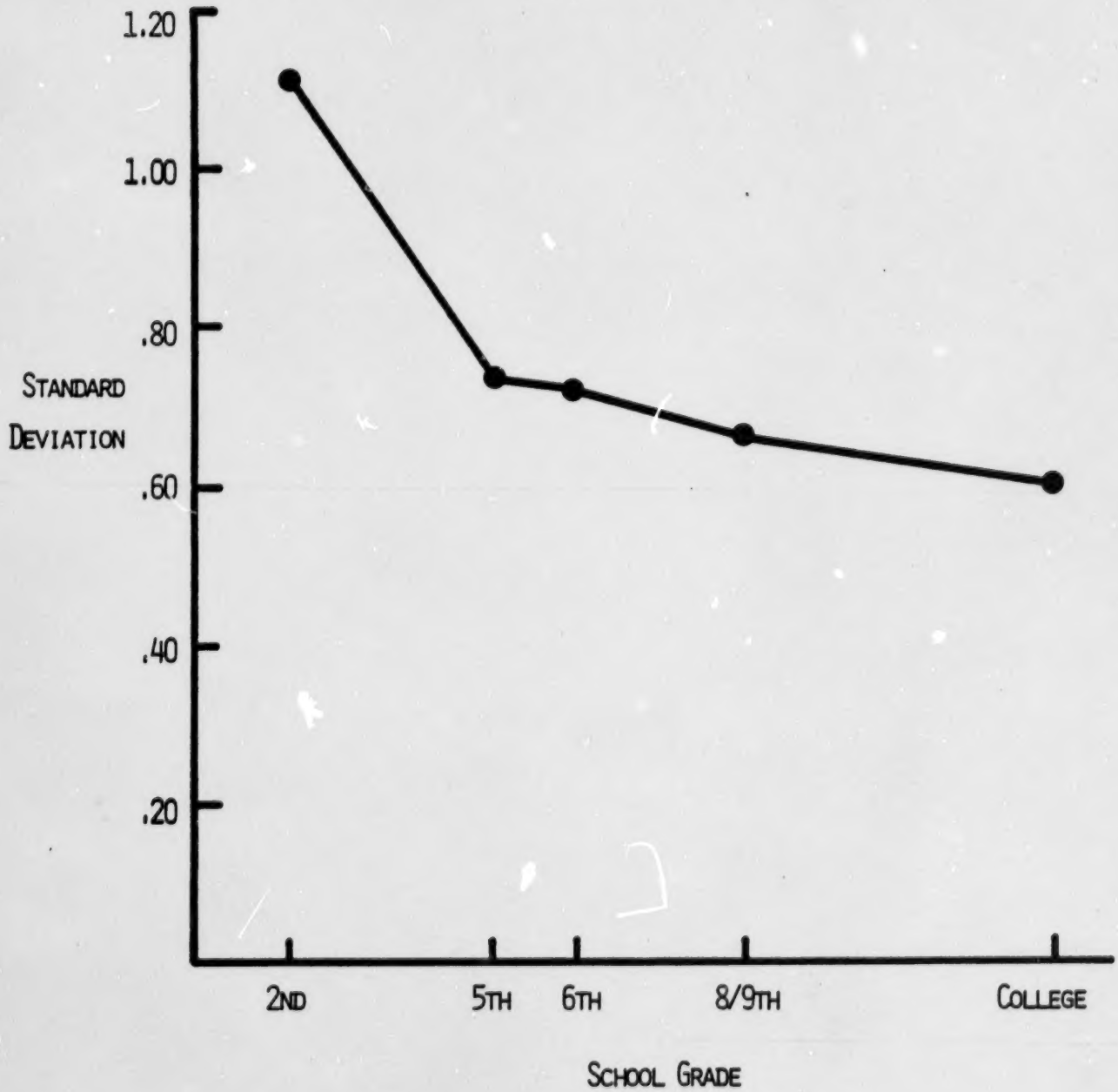


FIGURE 2. PICTURE-SORTING STANDARD DEVIATION AS A FUNCTION OF SCHOOL GRADE

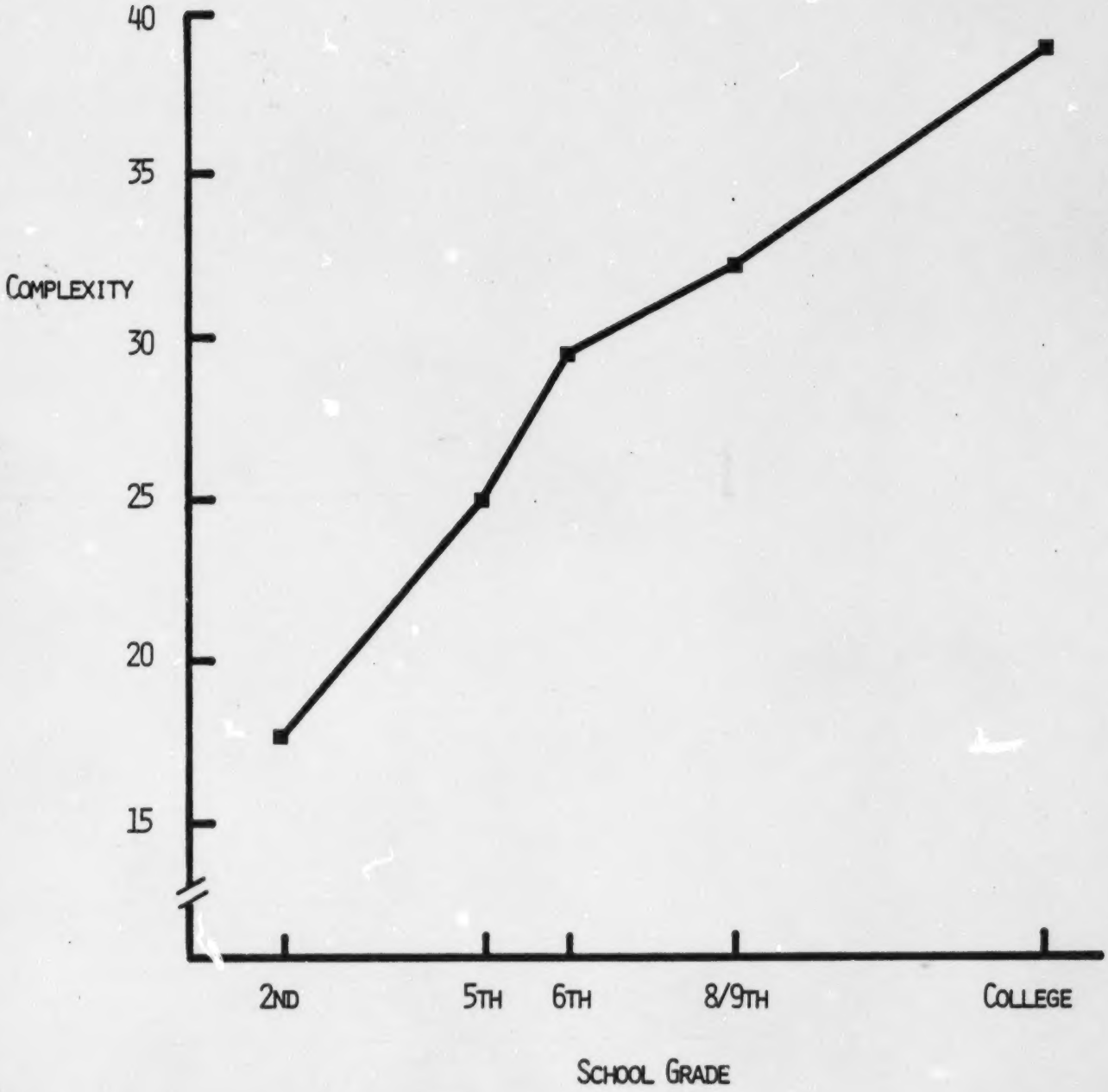


FIGURE 3. COMPLEXITY, INDICATED BY NUMBER OF CONCEPTUAL DIMENSIONS USED TO EXPLAIN PICTURE SORTING, AS A FUNCTION OF SCHOOL GRADE

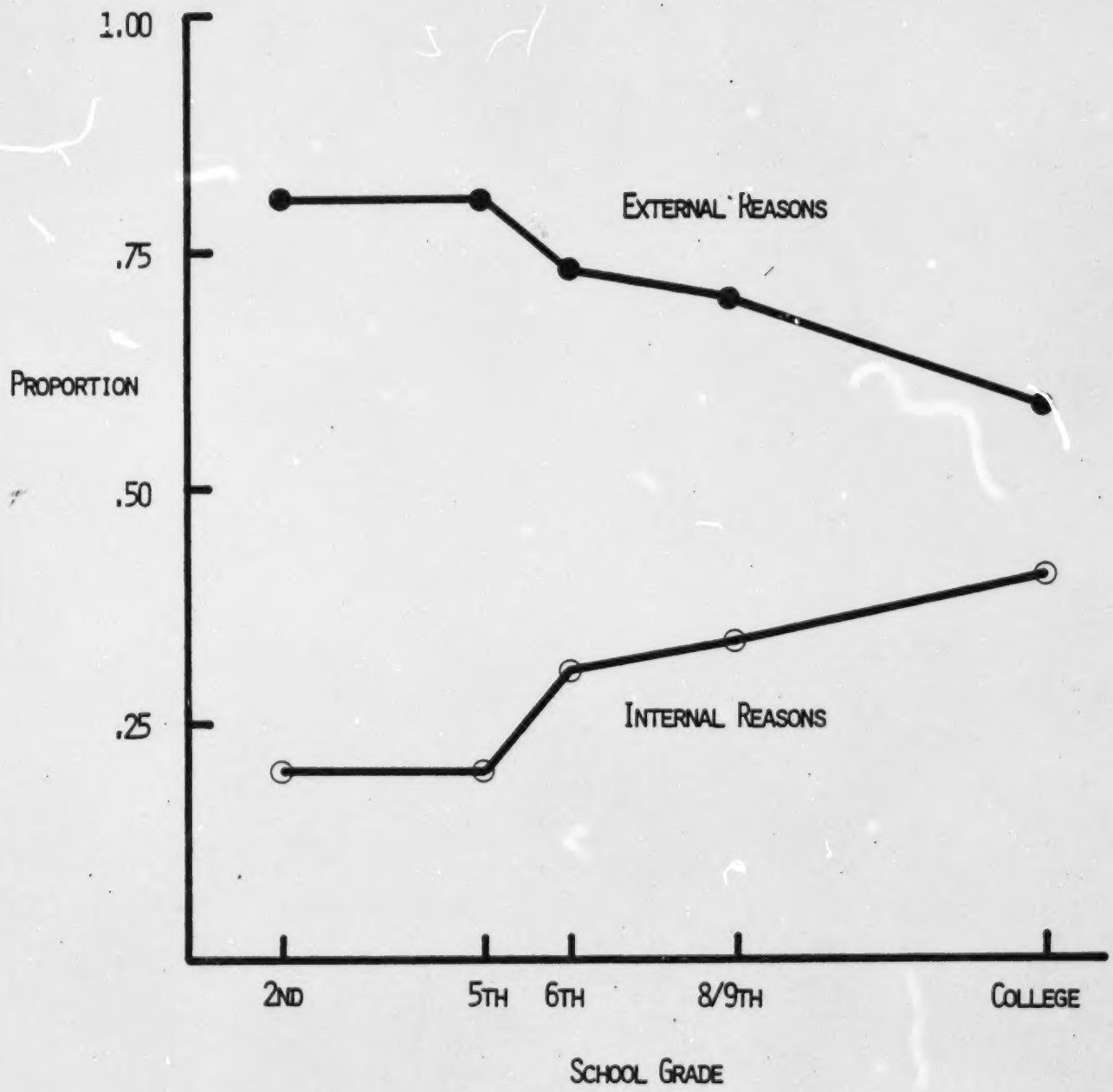
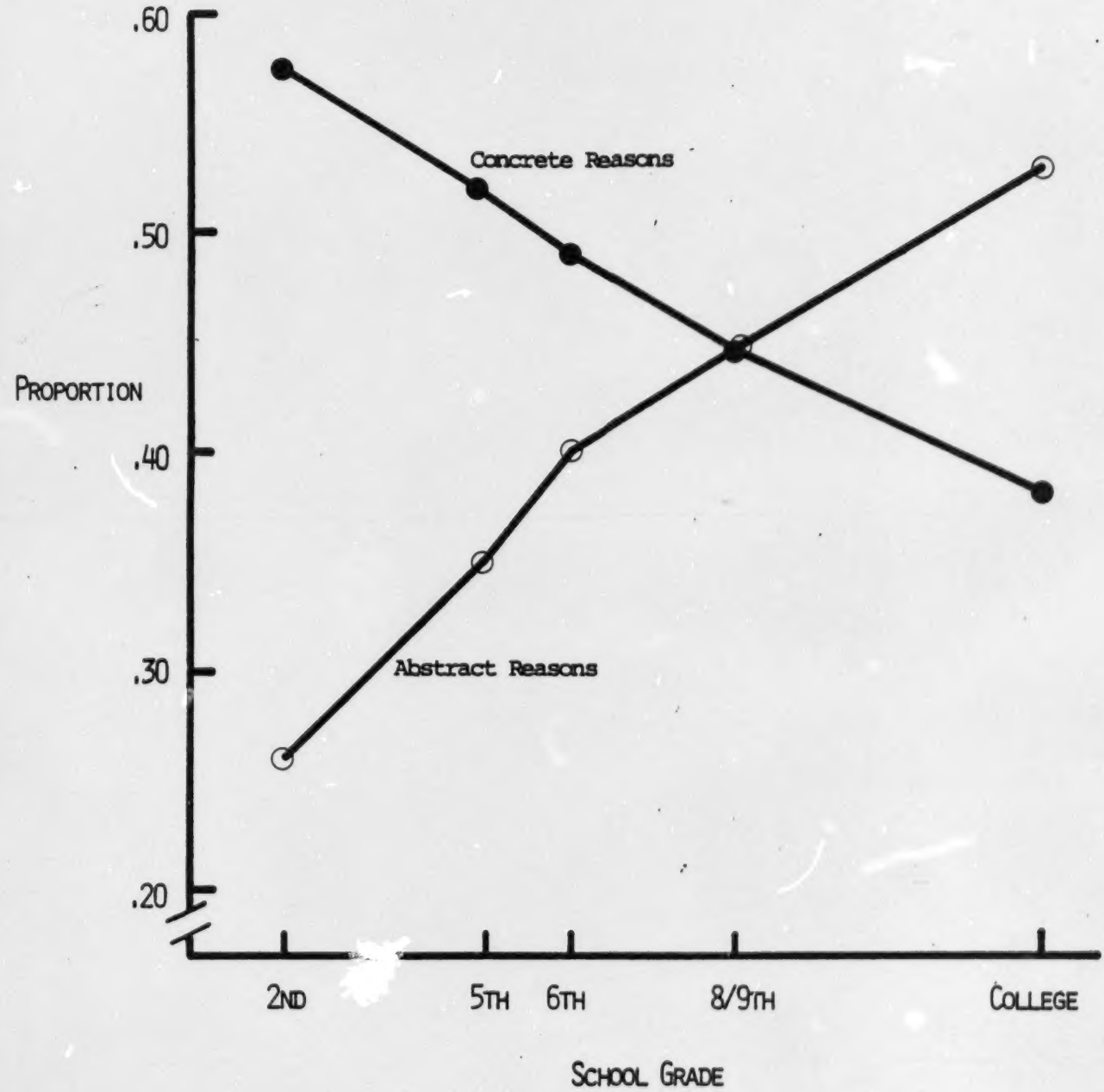
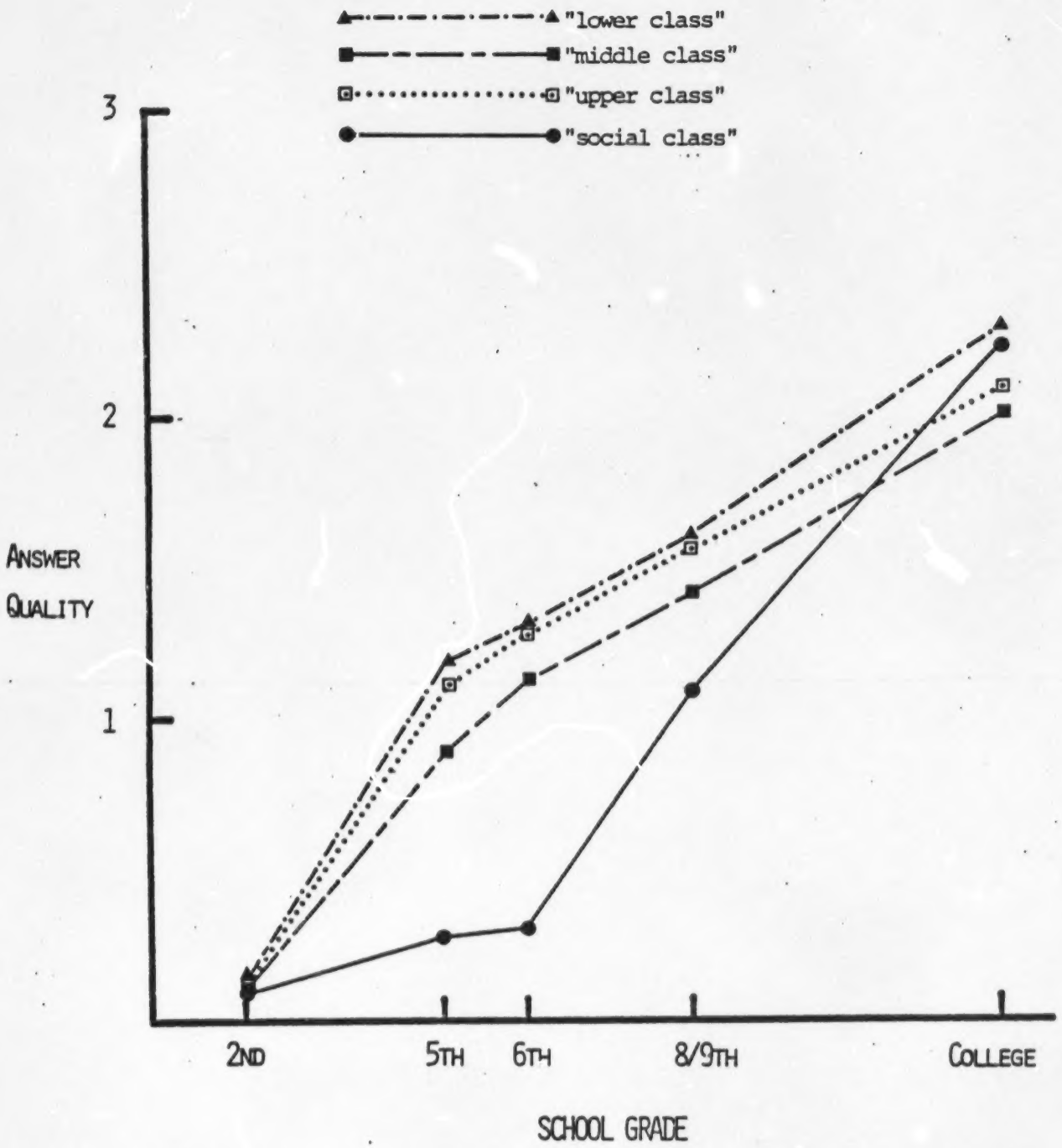


FIGURE 4. PROPORTION OF PICTURE-SORTING REASONS CODED AS INTERNAL OR EXTERNAL, AS A FUNCTION OF SCHOOL GRADE



Note: Within-grade proportions do not sum to 1.00 because not all reasons were coded as concrete or abstract.

FIGURE 5. PROPORTION OF PICTURE-SORTING REASONS CODED AS CONCRETE OR ABSTRACT, AS A FUNCTION OF SCHOOL GRADE



Note: 0 = No answer or clearly incorrect answer; 1 = answers in terms of richness, money, or some single dimension from Part 1 of the interview (e.g., education); 2 = answers in terms of two conjoined dimensions (e.g., money and education); 3 = answers in terms of a system of classes (e.g., "refers to the way society is arranged, in classes"; "the upper class looks down on the lower class").

FIGURE 6. QUALITY OF EXPLANATIONS OF THE TERMS "LOWER CLASS," "MIDDLE CLASS," "UPPER CLASS," AND "SOCIAL CLASS" AS A FUNCTION OF SCHOOL GRADE

Table 1

SOME RESPONSE CATEGORIES FOR THE QUESTION:

What made you think these people were poor, rich, etc.?

RESPONSE CATEGORY	% of total responses	
	2nd Grade	8th/9th Grade
PHYSICAL APPEARANCE	20.0	15.5
BASIC NECESSITIES (e.g., home, food)	8.5	4.0*
POSSESSIONS	8.5	5.5*
JOBS	21.0	20.5
FEELINGS (e.g., happy, sad, upset)	4.5	3.0
MONEY	8.0	12.0*
QUALITY OF LIFE (e.g., have fun, nice life)	2.0	2.5
PHYSICAL BACKGROUND (e.g., place, area)	5.5	9.5*
FAMILY BACKGROUND	1.5	2.5
EDUCATION	1.0	2.0*
OPPORTUNITY/MOBILITY	1.5	2.5*
POWER/PRESTIGE	2.5	5.0*
PERSONALITY (e.g., attitudes, intelligence)	2.0	4.0*
SOCIAL CLASS	0.0	2.5*

*$p < .01$; t test for differences between grades when overall F test was significant.

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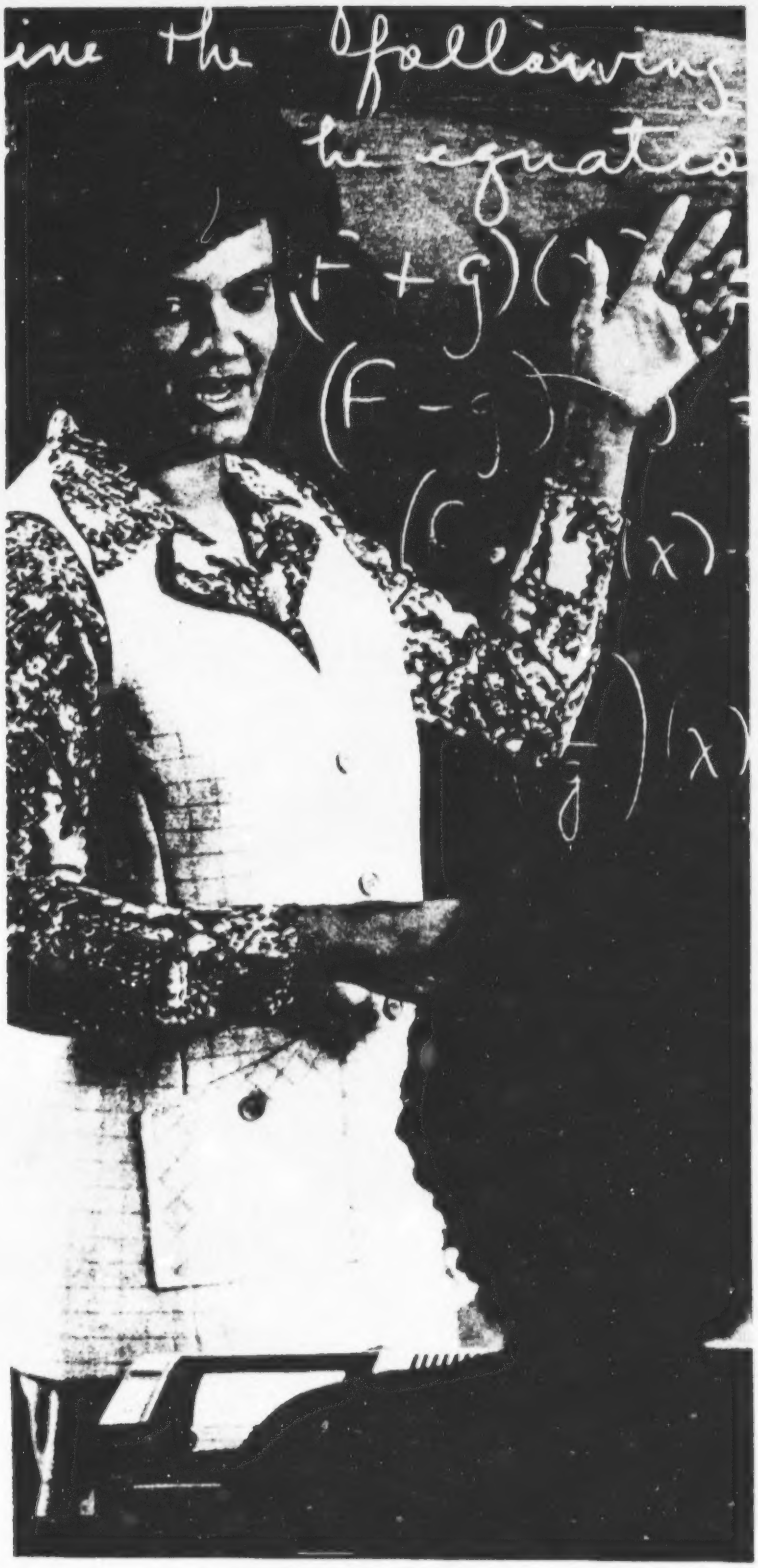
APPENDIX I

6



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